

## When the Eagle Encountered the Lion: An Exploration of Religious Syncretism after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico

### **An instance of religious syncretism**

According to legend, one day in 1531, just ten years after the Spanish conquest of Mexico, Juan Diego, a recently baptized native of central Mexico, heard birds singing the most lovely song from over the hill of Tepeyac, located north of Mexico City. Recalling the words of his ancestors, Juan Diego asked himself “Where am I? ... In that place, then, of which the ancients, our ancestors, told us, in the land of flowers, in the land of abundance? There, then, in the heavenly land?”<sup>1</sup> When the birds stopped singing, Juan heard the voice of a woman calling him to the top of the hill. When he reached the hilltop, he saw a beautiful woman who told him that she was the Virgin Mary. She instructed Juan Diego to go to the bishop of Mexico, the Spanish friar Juan de Zumárraga, and request that a church be built on that site on the top of the hill. Though Juan Diego explained all that he had seen and heard to the bishop, Zumárraga did not believe his words and ignored the request. After Juan Diego sorrowfully explained to the Virgin that the bishop had ignored this command, the Virgin told him to go to the bishop again the next day. This time, after Juan Diego described his experience again, Zumárraga ordered Juan Diego to bring back a sign to validate this claim.

Discouraged by Zumárraga’s doubt, Juan Diego tried to avoid the Virgin by avoiding the hill, but she found him and encouraged him to continue with his mission to convince the bishop to build the church. When he asked the Virgin for a sign to convince Zamárraga, the Virgin told him to collect flowers from the top of a hill, fill his cloak with them, and show them to the bishop. When Juan Diego arrived before the bishop, he opened his cloak and the flowers fell to the ground. On his cloak where the flowers had been, there appeared the image of the Virgin.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 26.

Convinced by this miracle, Zamárraga began the plans for the chapel at Tepeyac, begging forgiveness for his initial skepticism. He kept the image of the Virgin that was on the cloak, and ultimately placed it in the principal church so that people might come and venerate it. The shrine that housed the image of the Virgin became a destination for pilgrims, who believed the image had healing powers. The chapel was named for the Virgin Saint Mary of Guadalupe at her command. Veneration for the Virgin of Guadalupe grew in popularity over the centuries until she became a national symbol of Mexican identity. Reverence for the Virgin of Guadalupe spreads far beyond the country of Mexico, and no one ethnic group considers her an object of devotion.<sup>2</sup>

In searching for the origin of this widespread and entrenched veneration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, many scholars have found examples of veneration directed towards an ancient goddess long before the presence or knowledge of Mary existed in Mexico. In her exploration of the development of female icons of Western religion, Rosemary Ruether explained that the Nahua people, who were the natives in Mexico before the Spanish conquest, began to use the Nahuatl term *Tonantzin*, which means “our precious mother,”<sup>3</sup> as the title for the Virgin.<sup>4</sup> Bernadino de Sahagún, a Spanish Franciscan missionary in sixteenth-century Mexico, worried about the devotion of the Virgin of Guadalupe under the title of preconquest Nahua goddesses. Sahagún argued that the use of the title of the ancient goddesses, *Tonantzin*, which referred to the maternal aspect of any Aztec goddess, might cause the Nahuas to confuse their veneration of the Virgin of Guadalupe with their ancestors’ devotion to the Nahua gods.<sup>5</sup>

Sahagún’s concern with the use of a Nahuatl title for maternal goddesses in reference to the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, points to the development of a syncretic understanding of

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 195.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Christian figures and saints and ancient Nahua religious practice. The Virgin of Guadalupe illustrates this blending of ideology because, while the Virgin Mother endures as an important figure in the Christian church, the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe demonstrates the persistence of Nahua culture behind Christian religious practices. When Juan Diego first heard the birds singing, he referred to the religious teachings that he had heard from his ancestors, although he had recently been baptised as a Christian. The use of the Nahuatl word *Tonantzin* also shows the blending of culture and religion during this time, since the Virgin Mary was not a Nahua goddess, though the word referred to maternal goddess figures. The Virgin of Guadalupe is one of many examples of the syncretic development of religion and belief among the indigenous inhabitants of Mexico after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in 1521. This article identifies and discusses some expressions of the cultural and religious fluidity that arose among the Nahuas in the decades following the conquest.

### **Understanding religious syncretism in colonial Mexico**

The imposition of cultural and religious changes by the Spaniards onto the native people living in central Mexico, known as the Nahuas, was ultimately achieved with violence and other forms of aggressive control. However, at the level of theology and belief it also maintained a subtleness that ultimately resulted in a religious practice and culture not completely Spanish nor Nahua, but rather simultaneously both. This ambiguity influenced the way the next generations of Nahuas would talk or write about preconquest practices or beliefs. The language used in reference to preconquest religious practices shows the effect of the contact of Nahua tradition with Spanish Catholicism during the decades immediately after the Spanish conquest.

The encounters between Christian and Nahua religion began in 1524 with the arrival of twelve Franciscan friars, who came to Mexico to convert the Nahua people. These friars traveled from village to village, learning Nahuatl and teaching Christianity in the native tongue of the people. As a result, these friars attempted to translate essential aspects of Christian thought and ideology, such as the concepts of sin or monotheism, into Nahuatl. Languages carry with them cultural connotations, so while the friars explained Christian ideology to the Nahua, their use of Nahuatl affected their message and therefore the Nahua people understood the Christian teachings in a way particular to their culture.<sup>6</sup>

As the friars learned the spoken language Nahuatl, they created a written component of the language with roman letters, as opposed to the glyphic and pictographic writing the Nahua had used previously to record their history. Soon after arriving to Mexico, these friars established schools for the sons of Nahua leaders, such as the famous College of Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco. With these schools, the friars ensured a significant amount of influence over those young Nahua boys and men, controlling their education of written Nahuatl and Christianity from adolescence. These young men, the children and grandchildren of Nahua leaders, would eventually demonstrate this syncretism of culture and religion in their testimonies and descriptions of preconquest Nahua religious practice. Their writings reflect their background as Nahuas who were raised by Catholic friars. The texts that they produced demonstrate how the Nahua religion and religious practice affected their understanding of new Christian teaching, at the same time

---

<sup>6</sup> Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989), 28. Burkhart explores this idea in depth, describing the implications of the use of particular Nahuatl words for Christian thought and how exactly that the Nahua would have interpreted what the friars taught.

indicating how their upbringing as Christians influenced their perspective of Nahua religious tradition.<sup>7</sup>

These young men, trained by the friars in religion and script, wrote numerous types of religious texts, including extensive accounts of Nahua culture, history, and the conquest, in their own language of Nahuatl. Bernadino de Sahagún, a Franciscan friar who emphasized the value in understanding the Nahua culture, conducted extensive interviews of Nahua leaders and compiled these written records, forming what would become known as *The Florentine Codex*. *The Florentine Codex* is a set of twelve books written by Nahua men, about thirty years after the conquest. It was created under the auspices of the friars to record Nahua cultural history. The books of the *Florentine Codex* document the history of the Nahua gods, their culture, and the history of the ancient leaders. Because the Nahua men who wrote the *Florentine Codex* had matured to adulthood under the influence of the Franciscan friars, their unique perspective led to the creation of a text that demonstrated the interaction between Christian and Nahua religious thought. Though culturally and ethnically Nahua, the authors of the *Florentine Codex* experienced considerable religious and ideological influence from the friars throughout their adolescence and into adulthood. The Nahua authors provide insight into the complexity and tumultuousness of this period of syncretism, because while they and their ancestors were Nahua, the authors were also the first generation of Christian Nahuas. The *Florentine Codex* reflects the period of Nahua history wherein Christianity and Nahua religion affected the other.

Why would the Catholic friars be interested in recording the ancient Nahua cultural and religious traditions when they were trying to teach the Nahuas about Christianity? One of the original twelve friars who arrived in Mexico in 1524, named Fray Toribio Motolinía, wrote that

---

<sup>7</sup> Mark Z. Christensen, *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms: Texts and Religion in Central Mexico and Yucatan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

the study of their culture allowed them to gain insight into how to best find the vices of the Nahua people and educate them in Christianity.<sup>8</sup> The Franciscans engaged passionately with the mission to convert the “indians” of the New Spain by studying their culture and history.

Sahagún, who came to Mexico later and led the collection of texts which would become the *Florentine Codex*, shared this belief. He advocated that the study of Nahua culture was like a doctor studying a disease. He stated that the Franciscans needed a specialised understanding of the religion to prevent hidden forms of idolatry.<sup>9</sup> Sahagún intended to identify the Nahua practices, or instances of idolatry, and refute or remove them, as well as gain an understanding of the Nahua people and culture.<sup>10</sup> Sahagún’s initial compilation of the texts that would eventually come to be known as the *Florentine Codex* began as an extension of his personal curiosity about the new culture which surrounded him and evolved into an act of “holy obedience” to learn about Nahua culture in order to determine the idolatries held by the natives and remove them.<sup>11</sup>

Sahagún’s compilation of interviews of the village leaders and elders provides the one of the first examples of intercultural dialogue between Nahuas and Spaniards but he focused on creating the means for an impactful evangelization of the Nahua people.<sup>12</sup> The Franciscans believed that the their act of converting the Nahua would bring about the Age of the Holy Spirit, in which the promises of the New and the Old Testament would be realized on earth.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Andros Foster, ed., *Motolinía’s History of the Indians of New Spain* (Berkeley: The Cortés Society, 1950, reprint, Westport: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1973), 45.

<sup>9</sup> David A. Brading, *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots and the Liberal State, 1492-1866* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 121.

<sup>10</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, “Bernardino de Sahagun: Pioneer of Anthropology” *Sahagun at 500* (Berkeley, Academy of American Franciscan History, 2003),

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Bremer, “Reading the Sahagún Dialogues” *Sahagun at 500* (Berkeley, Academy of American Franciscan History, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Mario Gongora, *Studies in the Colonial History of Spanish America*, trans. Richard Southern (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 206, 209-210.

Since the creation of the *Florentine Codex* did not take place until approximately thirty years after the conquest, some might argue that the authors' insight into the conquest or into their religious history would show a preference towards their Spanish upbringing and education. The fear is that that the document would be too heavily influenced by the Franciscans to serve as an accurate representation of Nahua opinions or perspective. However, Kevin Terraciano determined that the authors of the *Florentine Codex* provided a uniquely Nahua perspective of the conquest in his examination of Book XII of *Codex*. Terraciano argued that inconsistencies in the Spanish translations from the original Nahuatl text exist in all of the books of the *Codex*. Sahagún requested the Nahua men to document their history in Nahuatl, but Terraciano hinted that Sahagún may have altered the emphasis of the Nahuatl text in the translation to Spanish.<sup>14</sup> These discrepancies existed in the length of the texts, or in interpretation and emphasis in the descriptions of particular events.<sup>15</sup> These types of inconsistencies in Spanish translations of the *Codex* and in the emphasis of the text permeate all of the books of the *Codex*, particularly those that deal with religion or the conquest. This points to a Spanish desire to craft a specific presentation of ideas, which differ from those present in the Nahua translations. Therefore, it is reasonable to view the *Codex* as an authentic representation of Nahua perspective, since the Spaniards who translated the *Codex* felt pressured to alter the emphasis of the text. Their Nahua perspective on the conquest, demonstrated by Terraciano, pervaded all of the testimonies in the other books as well.

In addition to the *Florentine Codex*, which documents the Nahuas' perception of Nahua history and religion, the Franciscans kept records of their own perception of the Nahua practices. Motolinía, as Fray Toribio chose to be known after his arrival to New Spain, recorded the

---

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Terraciano, "Three Texts in One: Book XII of the Florentine Codex," *Ethnohistory* 57, no. 1. (2010):58-61.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

Spanish reaction to Nahua culture and history in his letters and book, which he wrote over a period of about fifteen years. In these letters, he attempted to explain what he had witnessed in this foreign country, addressing everything from the plantlife to Nahua history. Motolinía described the religious ceremonies and recorded the history that he had learned from the Nahuas. His explanations put Nahua culture and religion through the lens of Spanish Catholicism. By taking what they learned about the Nahua religion and placing it within their Catholic worldview, these friars began attempt to explain and redefine Nahua religious history as Christian moral lessons. The way that Motolinía explained the non-Christian religion to other Spaniards probably mirrored how Motolinía and the Franciscans ultimately addressed the conflicts between Christianity and Nahua religious traditions when evangelizing to the Nahua. Motolinía recorded the knowledge he gained about the Nahuas in his book and letters and used this knowledge an evangelical tool.

### **Franciscan evangelism and Nahua responses**

This article studies the Spanish perspective of Nahua religious history, found in Motolinía's letters, in conjunction with the *Florentine Codex*, to address the following questions about the period of religious fluidity and ambiguity in postconquest Mexico: What do the discrepancies in the language used by the numerous authors of the *Florentine Codex* reveal about Christian Nahuas' discussion of their religious history? And what do instances of similarity between the *Florentine Codex* and Motolinía's records indicate in regards to how the Christian Nahuas evaluated their own religious traditions? To approach these questions, this study closely evaluates the methods of evangelization used by the Franciscans, according to Motolinía's account of the process of conversion in his letters. Then it will explore the internal discrepancies



within the *Florentine Codex*, focusing on repetition of Motolinía's teachings. Moments of repetition of Motolinía's descriptions of Nahua religion and instances of variation in depictions of Nahua religion can be found within the *Florentine Codex*. They provide insight into the complexity and fluctuation of cultural exchange in colonial Mexico.

Examining the moments of inconsistency within the text of the *Florentine Codex*, especially in comparison with Nahua religious history provided by Motolinía in his letters, sheds light on the changes in the Nahua perspective of religion during the early period of post conquest Mexico. This approach will focus on the way that Spanish conversion methods influenced the later Nahua understanding of their history or religion. The discrepancies of the text of the *Florentine Codex* demonstrate the fluidity of religious understanding in mid-century Mexico, revealed by the many authors of the *Florentine Codex*, whose varying attitudes towards Nahua religious history resulted in a text riddled with inconsistencies. The idea of religious fluidity during and immediately after the Spanish conquest has been discussed by many scholars, so this analysis of the text of *Florentine Codex* focuses specifically on how the instances of contradiction within the *Florentine Codex* illustrates how the conversion methods used by the Franciscan friars contributed to the resulting religious syncretism.

### **Christian Nahuas and the Nahuatlization of Christianity**

Language, while a means of direct communication, also carries with it cultural connotations. Non-native speakers of a language, especially new students, often do not know the entirety of the message, or the cultural context, of their words. Such was the case with the Franciscan friars. These friars learned Nahuatl and began to apply Nahuatl words that they

deemed appropriate to Christian concepts.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the Nahuas possibly learned Christianity differently than the friar may have intended, because of the linguistic connotative messages that the friars unknowingly transmitted in their teachings. Christian teachings fell on Nahua ears differently than they would have on European ears because of basic cultural values, so the Franciscans' evangelical approach necessitated the use of parallel ideas,<sup>17</sup> but the uses of these parallels held different implications than the friars knew or possibly recognized until much later. As a result of their immensely disparate worldview, Nahuas understanding and practice of Christianity developed with elements of Nahua culture.<sup>18</sup> The Franciscans unknowingly provided explanations of Christian doctrine in Nahuatl which carried different connotations in the context of the Nahua culture and religion. As a result of this, Christianity in Central Mexico developed with immense Nahua influence. This idea is particularly important to keep in mind in reading the *Franciscan Codex*, because each individual author may have practiced a more or less "Nahuatlized"<sup>19</sup> version of Christianity, which would influence their attitude in their writings about Nahua culture.

Also facilitating syncretism and religious fluidity rather than straightforward conversion was the phenomenon that James Lockhart dubbed "double mistaken identity."<sup>20</sup> Lockhart explained double mistaken identity to be "a process... in which each side of the cultural exchange presumes that a given form or concept is functioning in the way familiar within its own tradition and is unaware of or unimpressed by the other side's interpretation."<sup>21</sup> This idea follows in religious practice, especially since some Nahua practices seemed similar to Christian

---

<sup>16</sup> Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*, 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>20</sup> James Lockhart, "Double Mistaken Identity: Some Nahua Concepts in Postconquest Guise," *Of Things of the Indies: Essays Old and New in Early Latin American History* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 99.

practices, such as fasting or the cult of saints, which in practice closely mirrored the Nahua practice of devoting particular temples to individual gods or goddesses.<sup>22</sup> When Lockhart addressed the double mistaken identities that could be found in religious practice, he particularly indicated how the polytheistic Nahua people easily replaced their veneration of particular gods in temples with devotion for saints in churches which were dedicated to those saints specifically. Religious practice would not have changed terribly dramatically from the Nahua perspective and how Spaniards interpreted the Nahua incorporation of Christianity as religious devotion.<sup>23</sup> Similar to how Christian ideology took on elements of Nahua culture because of the linguistic confusion brought about the friars' lack of a thorough understanding of Nahuatl, Christian religious practice in Mexico also took on features of Nahua religious practice. Christian expectations of religious practice did not differ considerably from Nahua practice, and functionally the Nahuas continued as they had before, with particular features of Christianity serving as equivalent replacements.

The Franciscan friars approached the evangelism of the Nahuas as education of Christianity. This method served them well because the Nahuas were accustomed to accepting the new gods of conquerors. Lockhart described this by specifying that "the new god in any case always proved to be an agglomeration of attributes familiar from the local pantheon and hence easy to assimilate."<sup>24</sup> Religion in the Nahua culture, as in many cultures, had close ties to political and social customs, so religious practices in Central Mexico after the Spanish conquest stayed connected to social power.<sup>25</sup> James Lockhart's extraordinarily detailed study of Nahua religious practice and its relation to Nahua culture, addressed the Spanish imposition of culture

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 113-115.

<sup>24</sup> James Lockhart, "Religious Life" *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 203.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 203-204.

and religious practice, which provided invaluable perspective and context to this study. Lockhart provided explicit examples of how indigenous and Spanish patterns reinforced each other. This study pulls from Lockhart's central idea of religious interaction and exchange, focusing on the ways that Spanish thought influenced Nahua perspective, especially inasmuch as Spanish evangelization affected the Nahua Christians' perspective of their own ancestral culture.

At the same time, postconquest Nahua religious texts also reflect what has been called the "Nahuatlization" of Christianity as understood by the newly baptized native Christians in Mexico. Religious texts which were authored by Nahuas demonstrate a Nahua interpretation of the Christian lessons, in contrast to those composed by the Franciscans.<sup>26</sup> Rarely did Nahuas have an opportunity to write a religious document without the direct influence of a Spanish friar, who heavily monitored the religious texts produced and screened them for potential heresy before the texts were printed and distributed.<sup>27</sup> Educated Christian Nahuas also composed unofficial, unpublished religious texts, which demonstrated the Nahuas' independent understanding of Christianity and Christian principles. These texts especially showed the level to which the Nahua who were raised as Christians reconciled their conflicting worldviews.<sup>28</sup> Though the Nahua authors of the *Florentine Codex* worked in conjunction with Franciscan friars, the text possesses the potential for individual expression and the intent to reconcile Nahua heritage with Christian tradition, much like the Nahua unpublished texts. This study views the *Florentine Codex* as an expression of the perspectives of the educated Christian Nahuas who authored it.

### **Motolinía's History of the Conquest and his Interpretation of Nahua History**

---

<sup>26</sup> Christensen, *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 53-57.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 84-87.

In order to begin to understand the perspective of the Christian Nahuas, it is necessary to examine the evangelical approach of those who educated them. Fray Toribio, or Motolinía, his preferred name, was among the twelve original Franciscan friars who arrived in Mexico in 1524 and proselytized Christianity to the Nahua. The friars arrived wearing threadbare clothes, and without shoes. When Fray Toribio arrived in Mexico, he noticed the natives repeated *motolinía* while staring at him and the other friars. He learned that this word meant “poor,” and adopted the word as his name, in part because of its meaning and in part because it was the first word in Nahuatl that he learned.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of the difficulty of finding time and seclusion to write, Motolinía began chronicling his experience in New Spain, documenting the Nahua history, customs, and their conversion. He wrote his “Introductory Letter” over the course of several years, in which Motolinía concerned himself with providing a clear explanation of the Nahua people, their culture, and the landscape. Motolinía took great interest in the people of this New Spain as well as the country itself.<sup>30</sup> Motolinía’s completed his *History of the Indians*, which has three books, in February of 1541 after writing during the years 1536, 1537, 1538, and 1540.<sup>31</sup> Motolinía witnessed the majority of the scenes described in his *History*, but for those which he did not see himself, Motolinía took great care to find what he considered to be reliable facts and sources.<sup>32</sup>

Motolinía defined his *History* as the recording of “the ancient rites, idolatries, and sacrifices of the Indians of New Spain” and “the marvelous conversion which God has effected in them.”<sup>33</sup> While Motolinía spent time documenting details about Nahua culture, he considered the conversion of the Nahua his primary objective. Motolinía argued that the friars sought to

---

<sup>29</sup> Foster, *Motolinía’s History*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 23.

learn about Nahua religious traditions in order to effectively “[confound] and [dissipate] the errors and the blindness of the Indians.”<sup>34</sup> He travelled barefoot from town to town with Nahua guides, meeting and ministering to the people he met in each village with compassion and respect.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Motolinía expressed respect for the Nahua people, praising their devotion to Christianity and to Christ. He voiced this admiration, saying “As if their lives were at stake each one strives to be better than his neighbor or acquaintance; and really there is so much to say and so much to tell about the fine Christianity of these Indians that one could make a good-sized book of that alone.”<sup>36</sup>

Motolinía’s description of his interpretation of what he learned, especially in reference to the history of their gods or the motive behind their religious rituals provides insight into how the friars viewed the Nahua religious history in Catholic terms. The documentation that Motolinía provided about the Spaniard’s process of proselytizing among the Nahuas reveals the Franciscan friars’ reactions to Nahua traditions as well as the approaches the friars took to combat what they viewed as idolatrous behavior. For example, Motolinía, as well as the other friars, condemned Nahua gods as “demons” or “devils.”<sup>37</sup> Motolinía described how the friars taught the natives “that it was the devil whom they [had] served” and the the devil intended to bring all those who believed in him to “eternal damnation” with “terrible sufferings.”<sup>38</sup> Repeatedly, Motolinía classified the Nahua gods as devils or idols, and described the temples as “a copy of hell itself.”<sup>39</sup> He referred to the land in the same way, while recounting his experience living in Mexico. He said Motolinía described the Nahuas’ initial response to hearing about “the true and

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 52.

universal Lord”<sup>40</sup> as disinterested and unconcerned with religious teaching. He said that the Nahuas wanted to learn “how to give themselves over to vice and sin by taking part in sacrifices and festivals, eating, drinking, and becoming intoxicated...”<sup>41</sup>

Yet even as he equated Nahua gods with demons in detailing the history of the native people of Mexico, he described the origin of the Nahua god, Quetzalcoatl, in a very different way. One certain lord had six sons with his first wife, and each of these sons became the head in a line of native people that each formed their own nation. This lord had one son with his second wife, who was Quetzalcoatl. Motolinía described Quetzalcoatl’s history and character, while alluding to his local status as a god. Motolinía wrote that Quetzalcoatl “turned out to be an honest and temperate man” who “began to do penance, by fasting and scourging himself.”<sup>42</sup> Motolinía continued to explain how Quetzalcoatl “[began] to preach natural law, as they say, and to teach the practice of fasting, both by precept and by example, and from that time many people in this land began to fast.”<sup>43</sup> Motolinía described Quetzalcoatl as “virtuous” and “chaste,” and even wrote that the Nahua religious ritual of drawing blood from their ears or tongue originated with Quetzalcoatl, explaining that “he began the practice... not as an offering to the devil, but as a penance for the vices of the tongue and ears.”<sup>44</sup> While Motolinía does reveal that the Nahua people considered Quetzalcoatl a principal god, he identified Quetzalcoatl as “an honest man,” and a preacher. While it is unclear why Motolinía did not categorize Quetzalcoatl with the other Nahua gods as a devil or demon, the distinction of Quetzalcoatl as a “virtuous” man might point to a particular evangelistic tactic on Motolinía’s part. It is possible that Motolinía believed that he recognized Christian motivation or actions in the descriptions he heard about Quetzalcoatl

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

from the Nahuas. If that were the case, it would be reasonable for Motolinía to want to preserve the character of a figure in Nahua history, to help move Nahua veneration of their gods to admiration a man who performed Christian acts. Motolinía may have singled Quetzalcoatl out as an example of honesty and chastity in an attempt to establish a connection between Nahua religious history and Christian practice.

Motolinía took great interest, or horror, in the ceremonies of the Nahua religious festivals. He mentioned numerous times the prevalence of alcohol or feasting and dancing in these festivals, but he also described some specific festivals. Motolinía's explanation of the Nahua festivals focused heavily on the human sacrifices, the fear of the people, and the natives wearing the skin of the sacrificed people. Motolinía concentrated heavily on the "victims" of the festivals, those who the Nahua sacrificed, though he did also described the dancing, fasting, and bloodletting of other festivals. Motolinía focused on the parts of these celebrations which would have been most shocking, such as human sacrifice, the ceremonial eating of said sacrifices, and the Nahuas' use of the flayed skin. Motolinía's depiction of the festivals passes severe judgement on these practices. Motolinía called them "cruel,"<sup>45</sup> full of torture,<sup>46</sup> or even "diabolical."<sup>47</sup> Motolinía named several festivals in particular, and then primarily described the sacrificial ceremony of the festivals, occasionally mentioning the fasting or the dancing involved. His judgment of the Nahua festivals very strongly condemned them as frightening, savage, and cruel, so while his description seem very thorough, Motolinía's personal reaction to these festivals permeated his retelling of these religious practices.

Motolinía condemned Nahua religious expression, festivals, and ancient Nahua gods with strong language. He compared nearly every element of Nahua religion that he encountered with

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 66, but also throughout the chapters dealing with the festivals. See pages 61-85.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 71.



the work of the devil or devils. Their temples of worship seemed to him like replicas of hell. With the exception of Quetzalcoatl, who Motolinía understood to be an example of morality, Motolinía described the facets of Nahua religious practice as evil. This insight into Motolinía's understanding and opinion of Nahua religion points to the Franciscan guideline for how they would address and educate the Nahuas in Christianity. The goal was to use their knowledge of Nahua culture to more effectively redirect Nahua worship to the Christian God.

### **Examining the *Florentine Codex***

About ten to twenty years after Motolinía recorded his thoughts on Nahua religious history, some of his former students wrote about Nahua beliefs. In spite of their Christian upbringing, these Nahua scholars offered a perspective of Nahua religion that stood apart from Motolinía's account. The first Book of the *Florentine Codex*, titled "The Gods," provides an in depth description of all of the Nahua gods. The language surrounding the actuality of the divinity of the gods differs from god to god. In the introduction of several chapters about the gods, the authors used distancing phrases such as "whom they worshiped,"<sup>48</sup> "whom the natives worshiped, whom they falsely revered as divine,"<sup>49</sup> "She was considered a god[dess],"<sup>50</sup> "he was considered a god,"<sup>51</sup> "He was worshipped as a god,"<sup>52</sup> and "whom the natives worshiped in ancient times."<sup>53</sup> In contrast, many authors merely wrote "which telleth of the god,"<sup>54</sup> or something similarly neutral, without commenting on the fact that this was an old god or

---

<sup>48</sup> Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, ed, "Book I - The Gods," *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain* (Santa Fe: The School of American Research and University of Utah, 1970), 1, 3, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 7.

separating themselves from the history. The use of the impersonal “they” in reference to Nahuas’ belief shows an observer’s perspective. Statements which reference the divinity of Nahua gods without clarifying that this was the belief of preconquest Nahua people provides a perspective from within the culture. This distancing technique could be a reflection of some authors feeling a need to establish a distance from the non-Christian beliefs or to invalidate the divinity of those gods. The shift in etic to emic language probably indicates a change in author. That some Nahua scholars felt pressure to use distancing language in reference to their history, while others did not, points to the difficult reconciliation of belief systems that the Nahua scholars struggled to communicate. Additionally, it might indicate that the authors held different opinions in regards to the earlier Nahua religion. This shift in language provides insight into the process of conversion taking place in Mexico at that moment and captures that moment of evolution in Nahua spirituality.

Following the short introduction of each god came the attributes of those gods and occasionally commentary on the ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of that god. For example, they wrote that Cuiacoatl “was an evil omen.”<sup>55</sup> The goddesses Cuiapipiltin were characterized as “five devils,” and in the original Nahuatl, the author used a Spanish loan word linked to the Nahuatl plural suffix, *diablome*, meaning “devils.”<sup>56</sup> Very clearly, the use of this hybrid word indicates a Spanish understanding and perception of these particular goddesses. While detailing the history of the friars’ work in converting the Nahua, Motolinía wrote that they “served and honored devils”<sup>57</sup> in their temples. The use of devil again to refer to these goddesses, especially using the Spanish loan word could be an indication that the perception of Nahua gods, or in this case goddesses, as devils resonated with this author in particular.

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>57</sup> Foster, *Motolinía’s History*, 48.

In contrast, the author dealing with Tlaçolteotl maintained a more neutral exploration of this goddess, though she too was considered to be ruler of “evil and perverseness.”<sup>58</sup> While the author who wrote about Ciuapipiltin said they “were five devils,”<sup>59</sup> the author of the chapter on Tlaçolteotl adds the classifier that “it was said” she was the ruler of lust and debauchery, or “it was said” she was given her name because her realm “was that of evil and perverseness.”<sup>60</sup> In this instance, the author, by using distancing language maintains neutrality and does not make a moral judgement of this goddess. This author then, either did not think it necessary to emphasize the lack of divinity of this goddess in regards to the Christian faith, or felt less pressure to remove himself from the belief in Tlaçolteotl by demonizing her.

The god Quetzalcoatl received numerous classifications in the various references to him. The first mention of Quetzalcoatl described him thusly: “he was the wind; he was the guide, the roadsweeper of the rain gods, of the masters of the water, of those who brought the rain.”<sup>61</sup> The author of this chapter felt no pressure to add classifiers to Quetzalcoatl’s status as a god, nor to his attributions. The use of past tense does indicate a departure from Quetzalcoatl’s previous position or actions as god, but the author does not seem to challenge Quetzalcoatl’s previous authority or power.

Though the language shifted from more and less distancing throughout all the individual chapters about the gods, the appendix to Book I deviated intensely from the rest of the text. The shift in language from the earlier chapters to that of the appendix is jarring. The appendix to Book I is introduced as where, “the idolatry described above [was] refuted by means of sacred

---

<sup>58</sup> Anderson and Dibble, “Book I,” 23.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 9.

scriptural texts.”<sup>62</sup> The text that followed addressed the inhabitants of Mexico, urging them to leave their confusion and obey the teachings of God. The prologue to the appendix is the only part originally written in Nahuatl. Throughout this prologue, the author used Spanish loan words like “dios,” “Sancto padre,” española rey,” and “diablosme.”<sup>63</sup> These words indicate that the author did not want to risk confusing the reader, and so he employed Spanish vocabulary to ensure the clarity of his message. The next sections are parallels to chapters from a Latin text *The Book of Wisdom* and later Sahagún’s Confutations.<sup>64</sup>

In Sahagún’s Confutations, all of the gods described in the previous chapters were listed by name and each received the qualifier “is no god.”<sup>65</sup> At the end of this section, he further emphasized his point by adding “all are demons, evil spirits” and “all whom the idolaters worship, all are devil, demons, evil spirits.”<sup>66</sup> Sahagún proceeded to address each of the gods individually by name, and when he came to Quetzalcoatl, he wrote “[Quetzalcoatl] was a common man; he was mortal. He died; his body corrupted. He is no god. And although a man of saintly life, who performed penances, he should not have been worshipped. What he did which was like miracles we know he did only through the command of the devil. He is a friend of the devils.”<sup>67</sup> This appears to contradict, or perhaps it was intended as a clarification, the previous assertion that Quetzalcoatl was a demon or evil spirit when Quetzalcoatl was listed among all of the other Nahua gods. Sahagún’s vehement condemnation of the status of these Nahua gods, though not surprising, since he a Catholic friar, seems to be combating any possible doubt as to whether or not the aforementioned Nahua gods should be considered deities or devils. This

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 55. This entire introduction to the appendix was written in Spanish, not Nahuatl, which indicates Spanish intervention.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. See note 165.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 69.

seems to point to Sahagún's fear of the potential that, even among the Christian Nahuas writing the text, one might become confused as to the divinity of the ancient gods.

In Book III - "The Origin of the Gods," Quetzalcoatl is described as a wizard whom "they considered a god."<sup>68</sup> In the third chapter of Book III, the author described Quetzalcoatl's appearance and his relationship with "his vassals."<sup>69</sup> Quetzalcoatl is depicted as an instructor, like Motolinía described in his history of Quetzalcoatl. A crier stood at the top of a hill and announced loudly the laws of Quetzalcoatl, who attracted large crowds of people who "would come forth to learn what Quetzalcoatl had commanded."<sup>70</sup> This aligns with the assessment of Motolinía that Quetzalcoatl possessed a certain educational authority over others. The majority of the recorded history of Quetzalcoatl described his journeys. Motolinía wrote that Quetzalcoatl traveled and preached, so the description of Quetzalcoatl's journeys in Book III matches Motolinía's portrayal, though the authors of the chapters on Quetzalcoatl's journeys do not mention preaching.<sup>71</sup> Consistent with Motolinía's description, the Nahua author also recorded Quetzalcoatl's penance. Motolinía depicted Quetzalcoatl as "fasting and scourging himself,"<sup>72</sup> while teaching this practice to others "by precept and by example."<sup>73</sup> Though similar, in *The Florentine Codex*, Quetzalcoatl's fasting is not mentioned, and his teaching of the practice of penance appears to have been by example rather than by instruction. The author recorded, "And the priests took their manner of conduct from the life of Quetzalcoatl. By it they ordained the law

---

<sup>68</sup> Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, ed, "Book III - The Origin of the Gods," *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain* (Santa Fe: The School of American Research and University of Utah, 1970), 13.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 15-16, 31-36.

<sup>72</sup> Foster, *Motolinía's History of the Indians of New Spain*, 32.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

of Tula.”<sup>74</sup> The Nahua depiction of Quetzalcoatl’s influence, though evidently prevalent and impressive, seems more passive than the active traveling preacher described by Motolinía.

In the ninth and final chapter of the appendix of Book III, the author described how “Quetzalcoatl priests” became established in addition to the requirements for one to reach this level of prestige. The chief, the great judges, and the nobles selected a man who obeyed the ordinances of the priests to be “a keeper of the god.”<sup>75</sup> The man’s social status did not matter, “he might be poor, or miserable,” the main determining factor was “if he well ordered his life and [kept] the commandments of the priests.”<sup>76</sup> Of the qualifications needed for the “Quetzalcoatl priest,” the author wrote:

One was sought of saintly life, of righteous life; of pure heart, good, and humane; who was resigned; who was firm and tranquil; a peace-maker, constant resolute, brave; caressing, welcoming, and friendly to others; who was compassionate of others and wept for them; who had awe in his heart. He was called divine of heart, pious and god-fearing-one who wept, who was sad, who sighed.<sup>77</sup>

These are the same aforementioned priests who followed the example of Quetzalcoatl’s life and set that as the precedent for their own practice. While Motolinía did not specify quite as many characteristics attributed to Quetzalcoatl, Motolinía wrote that Quetzalcoatl “lived virtuously and chastely.”<sup>78</sup> The Nahua description doesn’t mention chastity, but the numerous qualities of the Quetzalcoatl priest, presumably modeled previously by Quetzalcoatl, do seem to match Christian ideals of virtue. This depiction of elements of Christian virtue seems to be a reflection of how Motolinía’s assessment of Quetzalcoatl ultimately influenced the Nahua authors’ evaluation and portrayal of him. If Motolinía, and the other Franciscans, saw Quetzalcoatl as an opportunity to provide an example of the practice of Christian virtue within Nahua religious history, and began

---

<sup>74</sup> Anderson and Dibble, “Book III,” 14.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Foster, *Motolinía’s History*, 32.

to refer to Quetzalcoatl as a pious man, that would explain this positive assessment of Quetzalcoatl's virtue. It also would provide insight into why Sahagún felt that it was necessary to so definitively negate the divinity of Quetzalcoatl in his Confutations. Sahagún may have felt that the use of a figure from Nahua history as an example of Christianity might allow his continued veneration as a god, and therefore clearly established that Quetzalcoatl, in spite of his virtue, could not be considered a god.

The authors of Book II, entitled "The Ceremonies," explained in great detail the process of the numerous Nahua religious festivals. The level of detail and explanation of the ceremonies in Book II distinguishes Motolinía's evaluation of the Nahua ceremonies from the Nahua record of those same ceremonies. Motolinía described the festival of *Panquetzaliztli* as concentrated on bloodletting, sacrifice of nonvoluntary victims, the consumption of these victims' hearts, and the use of flayed skin to continue celebrating.<sup>79</sup> In contrast, the Nahua authors detail that each day of the month *Panquetzaliztli* had specific elements of celebration or preparation. The author described the cleansing and preparation of "those to die the captive's death."<sup>80</sup> The author wrote that these slaves or captives were bathed in sacred water, dressed in paper vestments, and additionally prepared by receiving blue stripes on their legs and arms, face paint, also striped and nose plugs.<sup>81</sup> Dancing appeared as an important element of this ritual, though Motolinía did not mention dance in his description of this festival.<sup>82</sup> While Motolinía focused on cruelty and fear as essential elements of this feast, the Nahua author described a ceremony that featured sacrifice, but that was only one of many elements. The author addressed death of the slaves or captives

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 62-65.

<sup>80</sup> Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, ed, "Book II - The Ceremonies," *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain* (Santa Fe: The School of American Research and University of Utah, 1970), 130.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 132; Foster, *Motolinía's History*, 61-65.

plainly, but without condemning it. The Nahua record of the ceremonies of this particular month add a significant amount of explanation for the sacrifice of the captives or slaves, and the Nahua people burned the paper clothes which had been worn by those who they sacrificed, so that by scattering those ashes “the bathed ones who died...[could] go down into the land of the dead.”<sup>83</sup> The author of this particular chapter did not place any judgment on the actions which took place during the ceremony of this month. Instead, by explaining more thoroughly the process of the sacrifices and the following rituals, these who were sacrificed seem to have been respected in their own kind of way. The author did not lessen the harshness of the sacrifices, but, unlike Motolinía, the author did not pass judgement on the old tradition.

In Book II, much like in Book I, the appendix added clarifying information. This appendix is written completely in Nahuatl, but the tone of the section changes from the earlier chapters. While earlier chapters approached the rituals of the ceremonies matter of factly, merely stating what was done and how the Nahuas practiced their ceremonies, the description in the appendix applied a more distanced language. The section titles especially established this distance, offering detailed descriptions of sacrifices “They Made”<sup>84</sup> or how “The Mexicans Made Offerings.”<sup>85</sup> For the first time in this book too, the sacrifices are attributed to devils, rather than Nahua gods. In earlier writing about the ceremonies, only the actions of the ceremonies are details, and the gods to whom the Nahuas dedicated these actions were mentioned. In the appendix, the authors begin to refer to the gods as “devils,” and the Spanish word for devil, *diablo*, appears.<sup>86</sup> This use of the Spanish loan word indicates that this particular author knew the Spanish perspective or opinion regarding the god in question, but could not find the appropriate

---

<sup>83</sup> Anderson and Dibble, “Book II,” 138.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 188.



word in Nahuatl. It may also be that the author was Spanish, which would again indicate a fear that the thorough description of the festivals could be perceived positively, so the appendix needed to clarify the heresy of the rituals.

### **Interpretation of the texts**

The level of Spanish influence reflected in the Codex varies from passage to passage, depending on who the author was and the degree to which they had mastered Christian theology and its language. The multiplicity of authors also allows space for conflicting biases within the work. *The Florentine Codex* does not represent a unified mentality of all the Nahua people, rather it indicates the conflict among the authors in regards to their Nahua heritage in the face of their Christian teachings. *The Florentine Codex* is a text that demonstrates the syncretic nature of religion in post-conquest Mexico. Instances of variance throughout the text illustrate that religion during this time was in a period of change. Attitudes towards religion, as demonstrated by the numerous authors, varied from person to person, which indicates the complexity of religious concepts. The language that the authors used in regards to Nahua religious history show that there was not one unified concept or perspective in regards to Nahua religion. Those who wrote in a more neutral or accepting way of their past may not have completely disregarded those gods as unimportant and did not feel conflicted about accepting the new, Spanish, Christian God while also holding the Nahua gods of the past in a form of reverence. The Nahuas were able to reframe Christianity in the terms of the Nahua cultural worldview.<sup>87</sup> So, the subtle discrepancies in perspective between different authors indicate varying levels of Nahua influence or perspective in the recording of their history.

---

<sup>87</sup> Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*.

Though the Franciscan friars hoped to establish a singular, Christian religion in the place of the native, Nahua religion, examination of the *Florentine Codex* reveals that what resulted was a multifaceted and ambiguous perception of religion. The Franciscans encouraged syncretic religious thinking by placing Nahua religious history into a Christian worldview and explaining Nahua tradition in Christian terms. This study of the spiritual conquest of Mexico reveals that Franciscan evangelism among the Nahuas resulted in ambiguous and complicated impressions of the past. The authors of the *Florentine Codex* created a document that recorded varying perspectives of Nahua history and captured the aftermath of the collision of two religions. From that religious encounter, the two religions ceased to exist in Mexico without the influence of the other, which led to the Virgin Mary recognized as a *tonantzin*, a mother goddess figure, and a demonstration of the religious syncretism in postconquest Mexico.

# Bibliography

- Anderson, Arthur J. O. and Charles E. Dibble, ed. "Book I - The Gods." *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. Santa Fe: The School of American Research and University of Utah, 1970.
- Anderson, Arthur J. O. and Charles E. Dibble, ed. "Book II - The Ceremonies." *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. Santa Fe: The School of American Research and University of Utah, 1970.
- Anderson, Arthur J. O. and Charles E. Dibble, ed. "Book III - The Origin of the Gods." *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*. Santa Fe: The School of American Research and University of Utah, 1970.
- Brading, David A. *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots and the Liberal State, 1492-1866*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Bremer, Thomas. "Reading the Sahagún Dialogues" *Sahagun at 500*. Berkeley, Academy of American Franciscan History, 2003.
- Burkhart, Louise M. *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1989.
- Christensen, Mark Z. *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms: Texts and Religion in Central Mexico and Yucatan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.
- Foster, Elizabeth Andros, ed. *Motolinía's History of the Indians of New Spain*. Berkeley: The Cortés Society, 1950, reprint, Westport: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1973.
- Gongora, Mario. *Studies in the Colonial History of Spanish America*. Trans. Richard Southern. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- León-Portilla, Miguel. "Bernardino de Sahagun: Pioneer of Anthropology" in *Sahagun at 500*. Berkeley: Academy of American Franciscan History, 2003.
- Lockhart, James. "Double Mistaken Identity: Some Nahua Concepts in Postconquest Guise" in *Of Things of the Indies: Essays Old and New in Early Latin American History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- Lockhart, James. "Religious Life" in *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992.
- Poole, Stafford. *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995.

Ruether, Rosemary. *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Terraciano, Kevin. "Three Texts in One: Book XII of the Florentine Codex," *Ethnohistory* 57, no. 1 (2010): 58-61. doi: 10.1215/00141801-2009-053.